

THE BLUNDERDOME

How could any one building have produced such hostility?

BY MICHAEL SPECTER

Throughout the month of December, the people of Britain were bombarded by a radio advertisement that made light of what many consider to have been the country's most embarrassing failure in years. "When your kids ask you one day what the Millennium Experience at the Dome was like, what will you tell them?" a gentle voice began, its echo of Churchill invoking memories of the nation's finest hour. "So what was it like, Dad?" a child asks. "Tell us about it, Dad," another chimes in.

"Will you tell them the truth?" the narrator asks ominously.

"Well, the thing is . . . I never actually went," the sheepish father blurts out. "You never went!" the children bellow in horror. "I know—I'm sorry, I'm sorry." At this point, the narrator returns. "At the end of December, the Millennium Experience at the Dome is closing forever. Maybe you'll love it—maybe you won't. Why not come and decide for yourself, while you still can?"

Last January, Prime Minister Tony Blair christened the Dome, after promising that it would provide "the best day out on Earth," at the "finest exhibition the world has ever seen." By December, it had come to this: desperate pleas for attendance, and enough buy-one-get-one-free hucksterism to shame P. T. Barnum. Although the Dome had its conception in the Conservative Government of John Major, it quickly became New Labour's opportunity and its obsession—a chance to bolster the nation's confidence and alter the prevailing view of Britain as a country frozen in amber, unable to overcome its long post-colonial decline.

Like Blair's party itself, the Dome—which, at a cost of more than a billion dollars, was the largest cultural expense in the history of England—was supposed to be about what comes next. "What we were selling was faith in the future of our country and our role in the

world," a member of the Dome's senior staff, Ben Evans, told me. "It was a kind of self-help motivational notion. It was supposed to make everyone feel great." Instead, it became a metaphor for political vanity and intellectual mediocrity. Blair and his ministers deliberately chose to put on a populist show, and they were insistent that a "tabloid view of the world" prevail, one of the planners told me. But nothing infuriates the British elite more than a display it perceives as tacky, and the organizers were criticized relentlessly for pandering to families in track suits. In London, the Dome was detested with a fervor that had been reserved "almost exclusively for the leaders of Nazi Germany," Simon Jenkins, one of its earliest supporters, told me.

"If you talk to the intelligentsia, you will get almost nothing apart from hysteria," Jenkins, a former editor of the *London Times*, said when I visited him one dreary morning at his home near Regent's Park. "Many of these people have never even been to the Dome. But that has not in any sense restrained them from discussing the 'fiasco.'" He was right: a surprising number of those who told me how vulgar the Dome was had never taken the fifteen-minute subway ride from central London to see it. "What did you hate most about the place?" I asked a friend shortly after I arrived in London. "Nothing, really," he replied. "I didn't go. Who *would* go?"

By 6 P.M. on December 31st, when it finally closed, the exhibition—and all those connected with it—had been drenched in public vitriol. V. S. Naipaul said that Blair's government was responsible for "destroying the idea of Civilization in this country." Andrew Lloyd Webber even suggested a modern sort of auto-da-fé. "There is nothing the public likes more than a good blaze," he wrote last fall. "Torching the Dome would attract a vast crowd, probably in the millions, who could be charged handsomely



Opening night at the Dome "could not have gone more wrong without loss of life."

to view the conflagration." Long before the Dome was built, Stephen Bayley, its flamboyant and aggressively highbrow creative director, had resigned, because, as he told me, "The Dome never even lived up to Susan Sontag's definition of camp: it was bad to the point of being laughable, but not to the point of actually being enjoyable."

The Dome opened on the Millennial Eve, with a grand soirée for what the British people call "the great and the good." The party quickly secured for itself a place in the annals of public failure, setting the stage for all that followed. A bomb scare (and poor planning) forced thousands of dignitaries to wait for hours at tube stops en route to the event, freezing in their party clothes. At midnight, torches along the Thames were supposed to light up, creating the illusion of a river of fire; the torches failed. "It could not have gone more wrong without loss of life," Evans told me. Jennie Page, the Dome's chief executive, was soon fired—amid publicity more suitable for the arrest of a serial killer, although she had managed to complete the largest construction project in Europe on schedule. Two weeks

after the Dome's opening, Prince Charles referred to it as a "monstrous blanc-mange," and instructed his pilot to fly around it, so that he wouldn't accidentally glimpse it from the window of his plane.

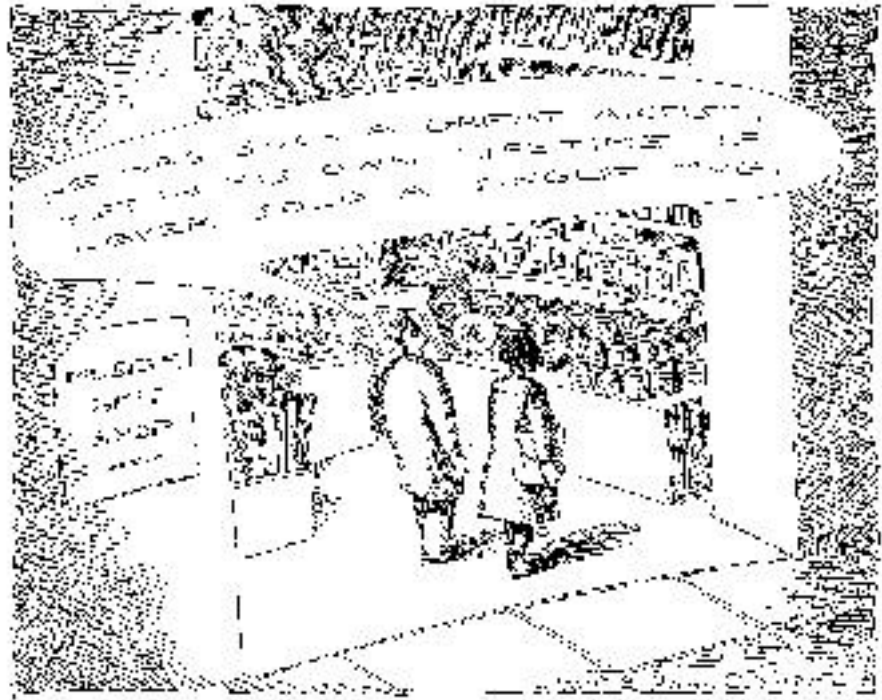
Intrigued by all the animosity, I decided I had better see the place for myself before it closed. How could any building—even one that is the biggest tent in history—have produced such hostility? Could something so thoroughly disgraced have an afterlife, I wondered, or would the government simply rip it down and try to forget? Before I went, I met with many of the people who had been responsible for the Dome's creation. Some of them, after a year of public humiliation, agreed to talk to me only if they remained unnamed. Others wouldn't speak at all. When I called Sir Richard Rogers and his partner Michael Davies, the architects who designed the building, their spokesman laughed. "We are done with the Dome," he told me.

Simon Jenkins flinched when he heard that. "That's just awful," he said. "Richard should be ashamed." Rogers,

after all, has designed controversial buildings before: he built the Pompidou Center, in Paris, which was widely loathed when it opened but is now considered a touchstone of the city's life. Since the early nineties, Jenkins had argued vigorously for some sort of national celebration of the millennium. He is one of the London establishment's most flawlessly urbane insiders, yet even he was staggered by the reception the Dome has received—particularly from his friends, colleagues, and clubmates.

The purpose of the Dome was never clear. Yet it failed not so much because it was poorly planned, or even because it was expensive, but because when the government promised that the exhibition would draw twelve million visitors, it set expectations that could never be met. "It was one of the two or three stupidest things I have ever heard," P. Y. Gerbeau, the executive who replaced Jennie Page, told me. Jenkins agreed. "It's a fiasco that you got six million customers, not eight million to twelve million, as had been forecast," he said. "We said we were going to need four hundred and fifty million pounds of lottery funds, and we needed six hundred and thirty million. That's a fiasco." The Dome's financial troubles fuelled the public-relations disaster: it cost about eight hundred million pounds. Income from entrance fees was anemic, and when corporate support fell short of all goals, the financial problem became critical. Several times during the year, management was forced to beg for more money from the Treasury. In September, Blair acknowledged the Dome's failure, admitting that it was a disappointment. "What would have happened if they had planned for six million and aimed it largely at children, and budgeted on that basis?" Jenkins asked rhetorically. "It would have been regarded as a thundering success."

"Go to Liverpool," he continued, "and they will tell you the greatest event of the year was the day our kids went to the Dome. If you ask in Newcastle, the one great outing of the year was the church visit to the Dome. The per-capita subsidy is roughly the same as that of the Opera House, but of course working-class people don't go to the opera; they went to the Dome. Tickets cost twenty pounds, but it still beat most



free attractions in London. Yet we despise it. We despise it because it is not Covent Garden and it is not the Tate Modern. It is not what ‘people like us’ go to see.”

The Millennium Dome sits on a mud flat beside a bend of the Thames at North Greenwich, on an abandoned gasworks beneath which the ground was so contaminated that much of the land had to be sealed in concrete. The site had been derelict for more than twenty years, and all previous attempts to improve it had failed. The building itself is a white circular collection of fiberglass panels coated in Teflon and strung together with forty-five miles of high-tension cables. If the Eiffel Tower (another building put up for an exhibition and detested at the time) were laid on its side, it would fit easily inside the Dome. Twelve canary-yellow masts supporting the building help make it one of two man-made structures said to be visible from outer space. (The other is the Great Wall of China.) Not even the titanium swirls of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim have a more powerful iconic force. The Dome has been variously caricatured as an inverted wok; Blair’s overzealous smile; a depth charge; and Mickey Mouse, in grudging tribute

to Gerbeau, the highly animated Frenchman who was brought from Euro Disney to save the struggling enterprise when Jennie Page was fired.

In 1996, Michael Heseltine, who was Deputy Prime Minister under John Major, seized upon the idea of using the year 2000 as a way to celebrate the regeneration of Britain. The docks and warehouses of Greenwich, once essential to London, had been abandoned for years, yet the prime meridian provided the city with an unbeatable millennial punch line as “the home of time.” A Millennium Commission had been appointed, but it quickly became clear that the body was a politically correct collection of people with little expertise in constructing or running an exhibition of this magnitude. Jenkins, who had served on cultural boards and had written extensively about architecture, was selected after receiving a phone call while he was on holiday in India. “They wanted to know how Welsh I was,” he said. “Apparently, Welshness was one of those things that they felt was needed on the commission.”

World’s Fairs always have a pretext. The Paris Universelle, in 1889, honored the centenary of the French Revolution; the St. Louis fair of 1904

celebrated the Louisiana Purchase; and the New York fair in 1939 was staged for the hundred-and-fiftieth anniversary of the Inauguration of George Washington. But the real purpose is to glorify the city, state, or country hosting the exhibition. Although the Dome was built in celebration of the Millennium, it was also intended to echo two epochal fairs honoring Britain: the Great Exhibition of 1851, and the Festival of Britain, which, a century later, celebrated the end of a world at war. The Crystal Palace, which housed the Great Exhibition, displayed the technical and economic dominance of the British Empire at the height of its power; it drew more than six million visitors, and turned a profit that was later used to start what became some of the world's greatest museums, including the Victoria & Albert. "The mix of exhibits was extraordinary," Paul Greenhalgh writes, in "Ephemeral Vistas," an intellectual history of the World's Fairs, "ranging from classical sculpture to giant lumps of coal, from a Nubian Court to wrought iron fireplaces, from steam engines to Indian miniatures."

Yet the Great Exhibition took place in an era without cars, airplanes, Space Mountain, or the World Wide Web, an era that had no multiplex cinemas or laptops. These days, you don't need to travel to marvel at new technologies; people can watch spaceships land on Mars, or "chat" with Micronesia on the Internet. Even so, exhibitions are rarely appreciated while they happen. The Festival of Britain, which is now looked upon with reverence, was so costly and controversial in 1951 that the new Conservative Government demolished its remnants as soon as it had the chance.

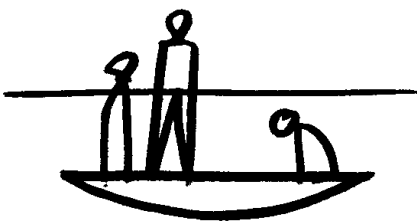
Nonetheless, everything seemed possible for New Labour in 1997. Peace appeared likely in Northern Ireland. The economy was stronger than it had been in years. So, after some hesitation, Blair adopted the Tory plan for a millennial celebration, and expanded upon

it immensely. "You have to remember that we won in a landslide, and that very much reflected the mood of the time," Lord Falconer of Thoroton told me when I visited him in his offices at Whitehall. "The decision to go ahead with the Dome reflected the same degree of enthusiasm that led to our election victory."

An old friend of Blair's, Lord Falconer was appointed the minister in charge of the Dome in 1999; almost no week of his tenure passed without one or more of the newspapers attacking his intelligence, his morals, his visage, even his waistline. Not long ago, I saw one headline that said simply, "JUSTGO." He is an affable man, but a year of criticism seemed to have shaken his confidence. When we had finished talking, and had tea, he asked, in all seriousness, if I thought he had said anything worthy of quotation or if I would be forced to make something up.

I set out for the Dome early on a crisp, cloudless Saturday in December. I had arranged to visit Gerbeau, the chief executive, who is in his mid-thirties. A former hockey star, he has the body of a fireplug and short, spiky hair; you could easily imagine him as a new Disney character—the Gerbil, which is what the press liked to call him. Nothing about the Dome's *annus horribilis* humiliated the British more completely than the presence of this foreigner, who spoke English with an American accent. The press had set upon him the moment he left Calais, asserting that he was a secondary Disney official who could not possibly handle the pay-per-view disaster area that the Dome had become. His résumé claimed that he had finished business school at the top of his class, but reporters soon uncovered the truth: Gerbeau had come in second, by three-tenths of a point.

The negative press never seemed to defeat him, though, and his honesty, coupled with his obvious skill, helped him become the one man whose reputation was actually enhanced through his association with the Dome. "I am not looking for a knighthood," he told me, smiling and at ease. "I don't give a damn what's going to happen to me in this country, and I don't care what people think. I'm not a politician. I run



parks." And he has run this park well. Visitor surveys have shown remarkably high satisfaction ratings. I took my own unscientific poll when I was there; of the dozen people I stopped, not one said that he or she was sorry to have come. "This project started in such arrogance," Gerbeau told me. "But look. There was a World's Fair in Hanover this year. It was a complete disaster. Politicians are involved. Why don't they learn to leave us alone?"

By the time I left Gerbeau's office, the Dome was filling with people. At noon, it was almost unbearably crowded. (It turned out to be one of the year's busiest days, with more than thirty-three thousand visitors—double the usual daily attendance.)

Before the Dome opened, there were vehement debates over each display—its cost, its intellectual foundation, its moral outlook. The Dome was divided into fourteen "zones," which were supposed to represent great swaths of human life, such as work, learning, money, and faith. But there was no controlling vision after Bayley, the original creative director, left, which inevitably led to chaos: some of the exhibits seemed governed completely by the companies that sponsored them; others had no focus at all.

Questions put to designers to help stimulate their thoughts were simplistic: "Are we what we eat?" for example, and "Is God dead?"

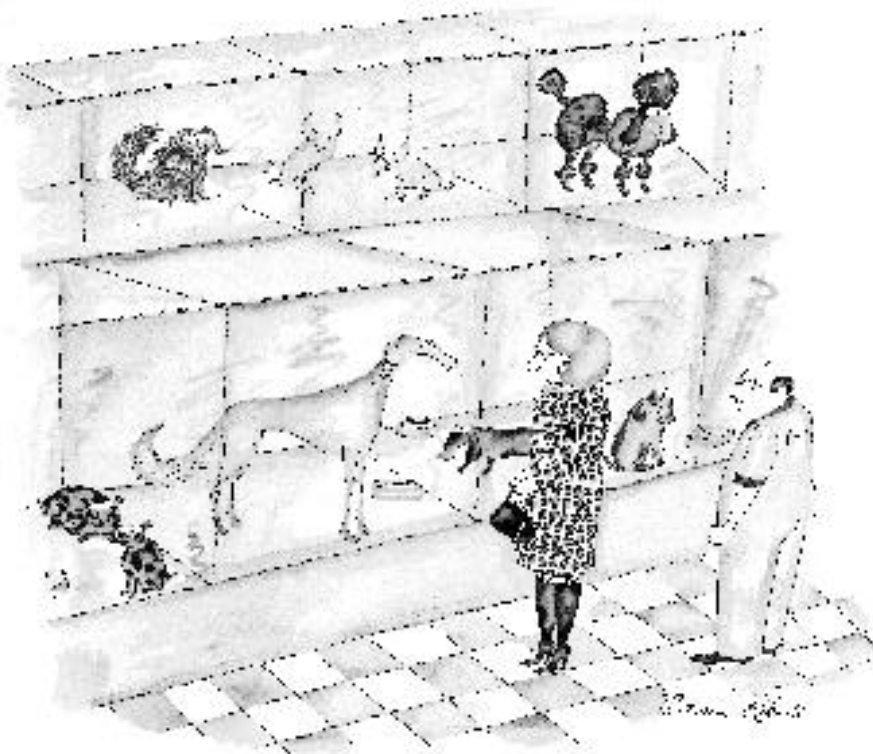
The zones are laid out as giant pavilions ringing the Dome's interior, and you can wander easily from one zone to another. When I entered, I went straight for the Home Planet, which was supposed to be a tour of Earth for visitors from another world. Like the rest of the Dome, it was a vast corporate advertisement—in this case, for British Airways. To enter the Home Planet, I followed signs for oxygen-breathing life-forms. Flickering strobe lights gave the British Airways "Intergalactic Spaceport," where my tour of Earth began, a lame disco feel. I was placed, along with about twenty others, in a pod with tinny radio speakers, and the ride started. A voice described Earth as the most heroic of places. As we watched the sort of nature videos most children avoid on Saturday mornings, the kids next to me fought over a toy from a McDonald's Happy Meal, and I learned that, millions of years ago, "life spread across the planet, and now it is a creature with six billion faces and one heart." Anyone with a CD-ROM player (or a child, or both) has probably been more amused

for less money by the adventures of Ms. Frizzle and her class on "The Magic School Bus."

On the day I was at the Dome, the lines at the Body zone, which provides a detailed tour of a ninety-foot-high model of the human body, complete with gigantic pubic lice, were too long to brave. The machines at the Money zone, which permit visitors to simulate spending a million pounds, weren't working. But the Play zone was thronged with children thrilled by digital interpretations of classic games—a jigsaw puzzle in which a computer photograph of your face was broken into pieces, a piano that transformed each chord you played into a shimmering pulse of light. I had hoped to try the piano, but, after standing in line for a while, I got tired of stares from kids who didn't see the point of letting adults share their fun, so I left.

Nobody ever quite figured out what the Millennium Dome was about. "It tried to be all things to all men," Michael Jolly, the chairman of the Tus-saud's Group, told me. "When does that ever work?" The government never quite figured out how to run it, either. "To my knowledge, no museum professionals were consulted," said Paul Greenhalgh, who, in addition to writing about World's Fairs, served as the head of research at the Victoria & Albert. "There are many very sharp professionals who know how to bring people to exhibits. None of them had anything to do with the Dome."

And, of course, there were other problems: the contaminated site, which did not present an appealing image; Blair's magnanimous gesture of giving away a million free tickets to British schoolchildren; the Greenwich local council's insistence that cars be prohibited in the area near the Dome, which meant that some travellers would have to drive to London (or take a bus or a train) only to then get on a tube—an uninviting prospect. (For residents of London, that was fine: a new subway line, the Jubilee, had been constructed in time for the millennium; it was beautiful and easy to use.) The euro plunged, and there has rarely been a better time for British citizens to travel overseas, or a worse year for Europeans to go to Britain. Even the weather



"Do you have this in a cat?"

played a pernicious role. Last year ranked as one of England's wettest in three centuries; the constant rain helped provoke chaos on the railways, which, along with a fuel crisis, deterred thousands from trying to get to Greenwich.

With help from Scotland Yard's Flying Squad, the Dome reached its nadir one morning in November: as stunned visitors looked on, four jewel thieves, wearing gas masks, wielding nail guns, and throwing smoke bombs, pushed their way through the security barrier outside the building in an attempt either to steal the Millennium Star—the world's biggest flawless diamond—or, perhaps, to replay the opening scene of the Dome-based Bond film, "The World Is Not Enough." The press was ecstatic. The *Sun's* front-page headline summed up the hapless year: "I'M ONLY HERE FOR DE BEERS."

The Year of the Dome has been judged a complete failure. Yet is that entirely fair? In the end, 5.4 million paying customers made it to the Dome. Another million came for free. To put that into perspective, the Tussaud's Group runs the top-two paid attractions in England—Alton Towers theme park and Madame Tussaud's—and it also manages, for British Airways, the London Eye, a high-tech Ferris wheel on the south bank of the Thames. Ticket sales for the three attractions combined reached eight million last year. (Alton Towers, which was the most-visited paid attraction in the United Kingdom in 1999, had fewer than half as many visitors as the Dome.) "Except for five or six attractions in the world," Michael Jolly of Tussaud's told me, "most places would give their eyeteeth to draw six million paying customers."

Does anybody remember that St. Louis was practically made bankrupt by the 1904 World's Fair, which established the city as the gateway to the western half of the United States? Or that Expo '67 was a short-term fiscal disaster for the city of Montreal—which then grew rapidly, as a result of the publicity and all the new building? Upon assuming the presidency of the World's Fair in New York City, in 1964, Robert Moses wrote that although he wanted to create pleasant memories for the fair's visitors, "what

finally remains in the ground when the pageant has faded . . . is of more concern to the next generation than any spectacle, however gorgeous."

The Dome had a disastrous year. But its past will almost certainly be judged by its future—as is true of the Festival of Britain. If the fine new subway and the billion dollars that have been invested in a desolate part of London help make it a vibrant place, then the mediocre exhibits will, in time, be forgotten. A toxic dump in one of the world's biggest cities will have become habitable and accessible. What will happen to the Dome itself is not yet clear. Gerbeau, who has expressed an interest in buying the building, suggests that it be turned into a concert venue. Stephen Bayley told me that "what they really ought to do is pull it down."

The latest in a string of potential buyers, a developer named Robert Bourne, has donated extensively to the Labour Party, and has been accused of receiving preferential treatment from political friends. "I went to see the structure of the Dome going up, and I thought, This is absolutely unbelievable—an icon building," Bourne said earlier this month. In February, the contents of the Dome are to be sold at auction. By then, New Labour hopes to sign a deal with Bourne's development group for a hundred and twenty-five million pounds. (Bourne won't pay or get the property until June, which means that Tony Blair will still have to answer for the Dome's perceived failure when he hits the campaign trail this spring.) Bourne has talked about turning the Dome into a business park for the New Economy, something he calls a Knowledge City—a Silicon Alley for London. His timing couldn't be more unfortunate, though, with dot-coms closing by the dozen. Bourne has spoken of replacing some of the tent's panels with transparent material, so that thousands of trees can be planted beneath it, and of building luxury housing along the waterfront. "Come back in two years, five years, ten years, and you will see a hugely transformed peninsula," Lord Falconer told me hopefully. Jenkins put it differently. "Half the Dome was 2000, and the other half is the rest of life," he said. "I say it's time to get on with the rest of life." ♦